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YSC'S CULTURE CHANGE & LEADERSHIP SERIES: ISSUE 5

HOW TO WRITE THE UNWRITTEN RULES

The best leaders shape the culture around them

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There's one inconvenient truth when it comes to organizational culture: there is a big difference between what gets written on the walls and what happens in reality. So, what does shape the reality?

Much more than their formal communications, it's the informal signals transmitted by leaders and line managers which give others that 'ah-ha' feeling of having learnt the unwritten rules. The good news for organizations is that shaping culture is a skill that can be developed by all leaders.

As a thought experiment, let's say you're one of six new joiners to a large multinational company. Your meeting room has a buzz of excitement and heightened alertness, as each of you susses out a big question: 'will my habitual ways of working and getting on with people seem normal around here?'

The induction has three inputs. First, you go through the company values via a PowerPoint deck. Next you view a recorded message from the CEO. Finally, your new line manager walks in and begins, informally, to chat.

Which do you think will have the greatest impact on how you act for the rest of the day?

The research gives a clear answer: the culture created by nearby leaders shapes behavior far more than that espoused by distant, senior ones.

We may intend to act in accordance with written rules and lofty statements, but our unconscious behavioral patterns, more commonly known as habits, are famously hard to change through intentions alone. Yet one thing does reliably shift habitual behavior: the subtle influence of those around us. It is leaders at all levels who, from their position of influence, set the unspoken social rules which define culture.

Leaders always have a powerful, subtle effect on culture. The real question is whether or not they know the full extent of it. So let's shine a light on the mechanisms by which leaders write the unwritten rules, and how they can become more intentional in doing so.

IT IS THE SIGNALS LEADERS RADIATE, NOT THE WORDS THEY SPEAK

There's a commonly quoted statistic that 93% of communication is body language and tone of voice, and only 7% is the actual words spoken. This mirrors how leaders create culture: whilst direct decisions, communications, and reward systems all matter, it is informal signals which are the more powerful, social, and less obvious processes.

Signals have power because they create 'basic assumptions' , and are taken to signify the truth about:

- What you as a leader approve of
- What you care about
- How you think others should behave

A LEADERSHIP SKILL THAT CAN BE DEVELOPED

Being a carrier of culture – a real one as opposed to a nominated one – is a skill that leaders and line managers can develop. The best have learnt to signal culture authentically, skilfully, and with real impact.

Leaders benefit from developing their awareness of the different ways in which they signal cultural norms. After all, signals are a form of influence, and there are many psychological channels through which people influence each other. Employees are attuned to three basic categories of leadership signals:

- **Visible:** signals which others observe and consider rationally
- **Emotional:** signals which affect how others feel
- **Unconscious:** signals which affect the behavior of others subconsciously

Leaders who understand how they visibly, emotionally and unconsciously impact others' behavior are able to translate organizational cultural ambitions into their local team culture. They act as conduits between big picture vision and daily reality. Their awareness builds consistency, both over time and in terms of avoiding mixed messages at any given moment. It is impossible to be perfect, meaning it's inherently something each of us can work on developing.

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SIX PRACTICAL TIPS FOR SHAPING THE CULTURE AROUND YOU

HAVING A VISIBLE IMPACT

1 Always role model culture – especially during a 'new normal'

It is common knowledge that people copy what their leaders do. This 'mirroring' is more than a deliberate bid for favor, with modern neuroscientific research suggesting the process is innate and automatic. What's more, a leader's visible behavior is especially mirrored in times of uncertainty, when social norms are yet to become established. A study into altruism found that leaders' visible generosity had a modest effect on employees when there was a clear 'normal' amount to give, but a very high impact when the socially acceptable sum was uncertain. Always be a role model, but be especially conscious in times when the social norms are still to be forged.

2 Be aware of what you channel other people's attention towards

What we pay attention to often becomes what matters, though we like to think it is the other way around. As a leader, what you are seen to notice and remark upon is a signal of what merits attention amongst all the noise. Throwaway comments can have more power than carefully constructed written communications: they are a window to what you actually think. If health and safety matters to you, for example, ask casual questions around how it is being maintained. As with any signal, consistency is vital – if the focus of your attention seems to change from day to day, people are going to have a hard time deducing what matters. Identify a few elements of your culture that would benefit from being reinforced informally.

HAVING AN EMOTIONAL IMPACT

3 Develop yourself as a storyteller

A story, or narrative, is anything that's logically connected, explanatory, and produces an emotional reaction. The best leaders actively shape stories for those around them. At the same time, narratives don't wait for leaders, and those who aren't actively shaping the story become its passive characters. Imagine a leader who never communicates at all: that in itself is saying something profound! Stories are especially powerful for creating a shared sense of purpose and meaning. Research suggests that a corporate story should be around 30 seconds long, make a clear point, connect with the values of the audience, and be easy for others to pass on.

4 Go beyond 'carrot and stick' by making motivation personal

Reward and punishment are undoubtedly necessary, but alone they are blunt tools. Connect motivation to the values of your employees, what they are most proud of (which might be different to what you are most proud of) and what really makes them tick. Organizational change can challenge people's feeling of authenticity: they formed a link between the old way and their sense of self, and now it needs to shift. Help people connect what makes them feel good about themselves with the new culture. People are much more likely to change their behavior when they feel understood, and when they've been given an understanding of why the new way is congruent with their values and identity.

HAVING AN UNCONSCIOUS IMPACT

5 Consider your rituals, your role in shaping them, and what they mean for others

A ritual is any group behavior that creates a mass social consensus. In (most) organizations they don't involve candles, skulls or chanting. Instead, they are the habitual patterns that have developed around socializing, praising, renewing and welcoming. Leaders create many rituals, and it is vital to make sure they are consistently signalling the culture you want to see. Regular pub lunches might feel warm and open for some, whereas to others the setting might feel excluding, and the dynamics cliquey. Changing rituals is complex, as they inevitably serve someone's needs. See rituals as a lens into what people value and hold on to and consider how they can be evolved to better signal the culture you want to see.

6 Understand the associations that your keywords are likely to spark

Think about your Covid experience – would you rather be contained in a 'bubble', with its associations of softness, transparency and impermanence, or in a 'unit' or behind a 'firewall'? The language does not affect the physical reality of what's happening, but it undoubtedly affects how people react, which shapes the quality of their experience. The same is true in an organizational setting: even if a description has no material impact, it has a human one. For example, deciding whether to describe old software as 'legacy' or 'obsolete' might seem immaterial, but imagine the associations sparked by each word for your IT team. Verbal symbols are essential weapons in the arsenal – or, for a better set of associations, tools in the toolkit – of those shaping culture.

IN CONCLUSION:

Culture is greatly influenced by the informal signals of individual leaders at all levels. This is a good thing: proactive leaders can close the gap between a vision and what happens on the ground. The ability to shape culture via sending the right signals is a skill which all leaders can and should develop.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Culture is always personal, both for employees and leaders, and so there will inevitably be a range of reactions to culture change initiatives. In the next issue we explore why labelling negative reactions as 'resistance' is only likely to exacerbate issues, and how leaders can use empathy and awareness to work with, not against, concerns.

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